

Fuss Management: Comforting the Irritable Child



You're out in public with your toddler or preschooler when the whining starts. Don't panic! When you take a calm, problem-solving approach, you help your child learn to calm himself when he is irritable.

Look for what's making your child irritable, and try a "quick fix."

- **She's uncomfortable.**

She may be hungry, thirsty, tired, cold, hot, or need a bathroom. You might help her adjust clothing or diapers, seat belts, or straps. Feel her hands, feet, and face to see if she needs a jacket on or off. Offer a snack and some water, or stop for a full meal. Make a bathroom stop. Change wet or dirty diapers as soon as possible.

- **He's tired or coming down with an illness.**

He may sleep if you can help him get comfortable. If not, say, "I know you're tired. You'll be able to sleep soon." Hug him, sing to him, or tell a story.

- **She's overwhelmed by crowds, new places, or wanting things she can't have.**

Find a quiet place to help her "collect herself." Reassure her: "There's a lot going on here, but we're safe and we'll be done before lunch." Talk about things she enjoys: "You want those toys, and you don't like to hear me say No. But we can talk about what you like about them." A little positive attention can lighten her mood.

- **He's worried because you seem stressed.**

If you're tense, try to relax. Tell your child how you feel: "This place can be too much for me, too. I'm glad we'll be home soon." You might quietly sing songs you both enjoy. Make silly faces together or talk in funny voices.

- **She's bored.**

Try giving her some jobs: "Please help me find a box of your cereal." "Are your muscles strong enough to carry this for a minute? Let's try." If she must stay in a car seat or stroller, draw pictures in the air with her or direct her attention to what's going on around you. Hand her a book or a toy. Talk with her about fun things to do later.

Keep in mind that your child does not enjoy fussing.

- Remind yourself that he prefers to have a good time with you. He just doesn't know how to do that at the moment.
- Speak to him in a friendly voice. Count to 10 first, if you must!

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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